

National & Community Service WHCoA Solutions Forum
San Antonio, Texas, September 30, 2005
Chris Kyker, Speaker
Texas Silver-Haired Legislature

"Making Things Better"

"The health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens." - Alexis de Tocqueville

Do you remember when you were a child and would fall down. Your Mom would be close by, pick you up, kiss you and make it all better. We're all a little older now, but we still fall down and someone nearby picks us up and makes it all better. For the next few minutes I would like for you to go with me down the "Road to Gerontopia" where we can find people along the way making things better for all of us.

What are these people like? How did they get involved? And Why? What difference does it make? On the Road to Gerontopia you find people of all ages, but many of them are senior citizens, many leading the way.

Silver-Haired Legislatures throughout the nation have been caught up in making things better since 1973 when someone in Missouri came up with the idea. Several states followed, including Texas. Today there are 31 states with silver-haired legislatures and also the National Silver-Haired Congress.

The Texas Silver-Haired Legislature began in 1985 when the Texas Legislature authorized its creation and directed us to identify problems of our peers, come up with solutions and report our findings in a written report to the Governor, the Texas Legislature and the Texas Department of Aging and Disability Services. For 20 years, TSHL has responded to this call. One of the first resolutions was to freeze homestead property taxes for the elderly and disabled homeowners. That was in 1986. We finally accomplished that in 2003. Today, 80 cities, 42 counties and 6 junior college districts have adopted the tax freeze. We still have a long way to go, but we have the authority from statute signed by the Governor to continue the road to freeze taxes.

During the last session, TSHL advocated to restore the personal needs allowance from \$45 to \$60 for Medicaid residents of nursing facilities. The Governor heard our arguments and issued an executive order to the Legislative Budget Board for the \$60 allowance. The decision will be made at the next meeting of the LBB. TSHL will be there.

It is interesting to note that 40% of the resolutions passed by TSHL during its Legislative Session related to Health and Human Services; 8 of those resolutions related to Adult Protective Services. Senate Bill 6, (79th Session), reformed Child & Adult Protective Services and the bill

was signed by the Governor & went into effect the first of this month. TSHL was there when it happened.

These are just a few specific laws initiated by the Texas Silver-Haired Legislature. We pass an average of 50 resolutions during each legislative session. About 75% of our resolutions are acted upon, but generally it takes 3 sessions for new ideas, new programs or new services to become law in the Texas Legislature. But we are always ready. Even if it takes 18 years as it did for the tax freeze.

TSHL representatives are elected by their peers from 117 districts. We are accountable to nearly 3 million senior citizens of Texas. That number will double in the next ten years. We are definitely on a fast tract as we make plans for the blooming sixties yet to come.

Why do we do it? Why do we become involved in public service? I think it's something about the American character that each generation discovers for itself.

In 1831, a young French lawyer, Alexis de Tocqueville, came to the United States to study American democratic systems. He was trying to find the answers to what makes America great. He wrote after visiting America:

"I sought for the greatness of the United States in her commodious harbors, her ample rivers, her fertile fields, and boundless forests--and it was not there. I sought for it in her rich mines, her vast world commerce, her public school system, and in her institutions of higher learning--and it was not there. I looked for it in her democratic Congress and her matchless Constitution--and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great!" <http://forums.crossmap.com/thread411.html>)

I believe the wave of volunteerism that has hit this country like a "tsunami" is because there is still goodness in America. There are still those young men and women who volunteer for the armed services; those who volunteer for the Peace Corp, AmeriCorp, SeniorCorp; those who volunteer for the American Red Cross, Scouts, United Ways, silver-haired legislators. The list is endless because goodness knows no boundaries in America.

Brian O'Connell, founding president of Independent Sector and professor of public service, Tufts University, states:

"Fifty percent of all Americans are now active volunteers. That's a staggering hundred million people, over the age of 13. And we devote an average of four hours a week to the causes of our choice." He has explored this phenomena in several books and concludes: "Through our voluntary initiative and independent institutions, ever more Americans worship freely, study quietly, are cared for compassionately, experiment creatively, serve effectively, advocate aggressively and contribute generously." (U.S. Society & Values, "American's Voluntary Spirit," September 1998.)

Peter Drucker, father of modern management and social commentator, projected that number would increase to 120 million volunteers by 2010 and 5 hours a week. He states:

"The main reason for this upsurge of volunteer participation in the United States is not an increase in need. The main reason is the search on the part of the volunteers for community, for commitment, for contribution. . . . They feel the need to do something where 'We can make a difference.'" (*Post-Capitalist Society*, Harper Business, 1993.)

Peter Drucker has been writing about management for 60 sixty years. At 95, he wrote his most recent book, *The Daily Drucker, 366 Days of Insight and Motivation for Getting Things Done the Right Way* (2004).

Today, we have an unusual opportunity to make recommendations for consideration by the 1,200 delegates to the 2005 White House Conference on Aging on how to make things better. I wish to make five recommendations relating to civic involvement of older Americans:

1. Provide an increase in the IRS mileage allowance for volunteer service. The current 14 cents per mile is inadequate and is a barrier to seniors on limited income from volunteering their time and skills to many causes.
2. Identify the financial value of volunteer hours of service as personal contributions, which may be deducted from social security income when calculating personal income tax.
3. Identify the National Silver-Haired Congress and the various state silver-haired legislatures as national treasures for information, guidance and wisdom. There are cumulative thousands of years of service and experience to be tapped.
4. Implement federal policies that support the continued participation and training of older persons in the nation's political, social and economic life including enhanced volunteer opportunities through silver-haired legislatures
5. Launch a new wave of civic involvement for Seniors in an "Aging America Well" program to promote wellness, prevention and continued engagement in volunteerism. I offer the "Aging Texas Well" program as a model.

I believe the road to Gerontopia is ready for travel. There are a few bumps in the road, but silver-haired legislatures across the country are ready to take the journey and many are on their way. The WHCoA can help smooth the ride with a few rest stops along the way. I believe Tocqueville and O'Connell were right. America is good. Let's keep it that way for generations to come.

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